



Life, death and beauty: performative writing in visual art

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The performative writing element of the collaborative exhibition project *Life is Over! if you want it*,¹ (Tracy Mackenna and Edwin Janssen², 2009) focussed on how writing in situ, as part of an artistic practice, can oscillate between monologue, dialogue, essay, poetics, reflection, research, and documentation, within a space between subjective and objective knowledge.

1. Now you see it, now you don't. The energy released through the act of conversation and harnessed within the written texts is temporary, transient and time-limited. The impermanence of the spoken word is secured through transformation to another temporary medium, the act of transferral ensuring that the artwork will disappear. There can be no legacy, confirmed through the recurrent letting go, dying into and failure of instable media. 'Life is Over! if you want it', Tracy Mackenna and Edwin Janssen, Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art & Design, University of Dundee, Scotland, Jan-Feb 2009. www.mackenna-and-janssen.net/mackenna-and-janssen/LIFE_IS_OVER!_if_you_want_it.html, www.mackenna-and-janssen.net/mackenna-and-janssen/Life_Death_and_Beauty_and_The_InvisibleTalk_Back_Fear_No_Fear.html
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The story: starting with death

Taking the familial experience of Edwin's father's death by assisted suicide in the Netherlands as a guiding narrative, a range of issues around contemporary death were addressed; how visual practice affects the representation of death and its cultural significance, how objects and images impact on people's ideas about death, the role that art can play in mediating issues of death and loss, the place the arts can have in the process of mourning. The participatory element of our shared practice was developed by providing a platform for audiences from which to engage with issues of loss, mourning and grieving.

The project was also motivated by questions that underpin our roles within the art institution. In particular we wanted to probe the proposal that a collaborative interactive practice can be utilised as an educational strategy, how we can include students in our investigation of key aspects of our practice and its broader cultural context, how an inclusive approach will enhance the students' experience and inform our practice-led research and pedagogic strategies, and how the understanding of art as an agent for knowledge transfer can be improved.

Supported by a Wellcome Trust³ scheme that through art aims "to inform and inspire the public about biomedical science and its social contexts", the project was situated within Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art and Design's public gallery. Students and staff across disciplines, along with external audiences actively engaged with an art practice that integrates production, presentation, exchange, research, teaching and reflection by

3. Wellcome Trust www.wellcome.ac.uk/Funding/Public-engagement/Grants/

foregrounding collaboration, interaction, curatorial practice, (personal) histories and interpretation.

The writing's subject

By placing centrally both our experiences of Edwin's father's death, we considered how death is usually portrayed as abject, aiming to unearth positions that are different to this by establishing a temporary site in which to pose questions, and from which to reflect.

Conversation between the artists and visitors often alighted on issues of how our society's severance of the relationship between living and dead disallows the continuity of social interaction and forms of social life: death is not regarded as an extension of life, not actively incorporated into the daily rituals of the living. A wealth of stories were released by visitors, many relieved to unburden personal histories and potentially extreme views, in the knowledge that they would leave the exhibition space and the artists, and return to an external and anonymous environment. Older visitors often reflected on how we fear death, yet do not dare confront it, and how this impedes our ability to see our own deaths. Moral and ethical positions developed around questions of whether we become more humane just before we die, and on how we position ourselves in the period immediately before dying.

The effect of conversation and debate on the students brought to the surface the high incidences amongst them who deal daily with end of life situations, often handling extreme cases in isolation as primary carers, impacting upon their confidence levels and abilities to perform as students within the creative disciplines. Discussion subsequently centred on what our systems provide, as means of enabling and valuing expression of these situations and experiences, through their curriculum and teaching philosophies.

What was revealed was incorporated, sometimes in a composition of only three or four words, into a series of texts that would be projected in the gallery.

A visual narrative

A visual narrative was established through the placement of slide projections in conjunction with borrowed historical artworks that revealed society's depiction of, and dealings with, death, and new text-based wall drawings on the subject. A purpose-designed environment integrated these elements with a public studio where we worked each day, and a series of public events. These cross-disciplinary events took place within the exhibition project environment, bringing together artists, curators, art historians, philosophers, architects and scientists. They included: a symposium that addressed the question of the role art can play in mediating issues around life and death; a seminar focusing on the relationship between place, architecture and suicide; an in-conversation gallery discussion on artists' perspectives on mortality; and a Master of Fine Art student collaborative performative response to '*Life is Over! if you want it*'.

Claire Doherty⁴ has typified us as “artists for whom a critique of authorship and the democratisation of art are implicit; for whom the role of the participant predominates through dialogical process; and for whom human relations or ‘the relational’ aspect of social context is a primary point of departure.”

This collaborative art practice is a site for the generation and communication of ideas around specific subjects. By creating spaces within which to raise questions the artists and participants can speculate and reflect *through* art. The visual narrative that binds together the components of our collaborative practice is framed within the social, engaged and participatory.

The art academy as site

A primary aim for our collaborative practice is its development as a site of knowledge production and as a dialogic approach to teaching and research that can challenge traditional genres, and question accepted academic practice in the visual disciplines.

The roles each of us combines within the institution as artists, researchers and leaders compel us to locate this practice centrally. Our belief in art education as an investment in social agency is driven by the conviction that making art is about process more than product, about creating new sites of inquiry in order to build social and intellectual capital. Higher education institutions are conservative and hierarchical yet there is untapped scope to introduce dynamic new models that through visual thinking stretch and test their value, as sites for trial and error, and their relationship to society. Testing the institution’s purpose and practice in order to refresh its core mission, was essential to the decision to locate this project within our own institution, thereby starting with the local as the point from which to question. We further aimed to highlight the artist’s ability to enable those being taught to take the central role, to demonstrate the transfer of knowledge, skills and position, in order to place the student experience at the heart, making the processes they go through, the stuff of their educational experience rather than the outcome.

Placing ourselves centrally within the exhibition project, we chose to expose ourselves to students and colleagues whilst simultaneously declaring our reliance on their participation for the project’s success.

Performative writing

An essential component of the project was the artists’ residence in the purpose-built public studio, located in the gallery. This daily presence was advertised, signalling the unstable, developmental nature of the work being presented and encouraged visitors to prepare in advance for engagement. The artists focused on generating new material

4. Doherty, Claire, *Naming a Practice*, in *One Clover and a Bee*, Margo Slomp (ed) Stichting VHDG, 2003, pp.29-30.

out of that presented at the public opening. Edwin worked on a series of pinboards that revealed a process of associative visual development, through combinations of material, informing the exhibition project's subject matter.

At the same time, and in the same space, I wrote, both in response to my own reflections on the exhibition project (to the environment I was working within), and in response to discussion with visitors, on the exhibition project's theme. My presence in the public studio triggered a series of encounters that led to discussions with visitors around the psychological, philosophical and ideological qualities and implications of the representation of death, mourning and loss. The daily writing of excerpts of text from conversation with students, colleagues, and external audiences, along with my own reflections on the omnipresent yet simultaneous absence of death in our societies, highlighted the subversive power of text generated through conversation and foregrounded the subjective, exaggerated and context-specific use of language.

Pages from the notebook containing my writing were photographed at the end of each day, added to the digital slide projection, and projected the following day, the work built up through the exhibition and completed at its end.

This written projection formed one half of the single work *Life, Death and Beauty: The Invisible Talk Back - Fear, No Fear*, 2009 which comprised two elements. Only *Life, Death and Beauty: The Invisible Talk Back* was complete on the exhibition project's opening, and Jan Patience described it thus: "Not long after the death of his father, Janssen's mother, who had been ill for a long while, also died. In the family home, almost in the manner of a Dutch still-life painter, he made a darkly mournful, yet beautiful series of slides using objects such as his father's watch, a glass and bottle of water, purple tulips and a changing series of highly personal photographs within a photographic frame".

The complementary slide projection '*Life, Death and Beauty: Fear, No Fear*', was developed daily through my writing, and was completed on the last day of the exhibition project.

The choice of slide projection as the medium through which to present the writing relates to what Darsie Alexander calls the "erosion of hierarchical distinctions within traditionally separate genres and the gradual loss of the 'frame' that renders art autonomous and unique"⁵ and represents, as Charles Harrison proposes, "intentional detachment from the cultural status quo with intangibility and impermanence of imagery".⁶ The constantly changing projections disrupted the otherwise fixed atmosphere in the gallery, appearing and disappearing, both unstable and ungraspable beyond their textual message.

My presence in the gallery was intended to stimulate controversy, resistance, dissent and debate, actively seeking out alternative concepts and views on the exhibition project's

5. Alexander, Darsie, *Slide Show*, Tate, 2005, p. xxi.

6. Harrison, Charles, *Saving Pictures, in Slide Show*, Tate, 2005, p. 45.

subject matter. Parallel to this activity, a series of structured events, open to external audiences, was devised as a complementary way of engaging visitors and participants in a process of thinking aloud, in the dynamic, associative and unregulated space of making heard unmediated thoughts about the exhibition project's topic.

The terrified writer

The act of appearing in one's own project can be traced back to the early 1990's in my work, before Edwin and I began our collaborative practice. This aspect of my individual practice existed as a way of opening up for questioning the authority of the artist's voice, by situating myself amongst, and at times apart from the audience, depending on whether my role was that of conversationalist or of editor. Somewhere deep underneath the surface was a rumbling anxiety, a questioning of the very validity and potential of the individual artist's voice. The current shared collaborative art practice extends and protects the solitary figure that was attempting to frame the discursive and the reflective within spaces for conversation, anecdote and debate. The presence of two has taken over from the solitary gendered individual, except where the act of writing cannot be shared, and so requires that I situate myself apart from my collaborator and alongside the audience.

Who am I talking to, and writing for?

These in situ writings are not addressed to any one person, rather they arise through the artist's public presence that craves engagement with whoever it is prepared to enter into conversation. Beginnings can be tentative and fragile, and often peter out across the length of a sentence. But those that flourish arise out of an unwritten contract, the act of silent trade, where both take part, and each knows that any outcome is speculative and contains no guarantee of resolution. The private takes place in the public realm as I sit and read, waiting for the opportunity to converse, feeding my thoughts on arrangements of words structured by others, on public writings read within the public gallery space, within the private sphere of the unspoken.

Contact is developed gently, the framework of the exhibition project providing the context for discussion. Objectification of the underlying subject matter comes through revelation, as the participants in conversation contextualise their position, referring to the range of visual material around them, or to physically distant or emotionally close experience. At this point, a non-combative, non-calculated relationship develops, based on the assumption that for a limited time period, a process of exchange will occur, mimicking the norm of conversational behaviour, necessarily shot through with tension, due to the time limits placed on the exchange.

Uppermost at this moment are the sensory qualities of language and haptic communication. Verbal exchange is loaded with the texture of the dynamic, never-completely frictionless encounter between the author and the object of engagement and consumption. Woven throughout are deep-rooted, richly-patterned social relations. The desire for productive mis-readings and novel re-castings of the conversation's subject

matter in wilful disregard of any canonical text, encourages the generation of fissures and scarring, and promotes reinvention.

Who is the author?

Is it me, is it me *and* my fellow conversants or is it me *with* my fellow conversants? Whichever of these, it depends upon the establishment of trust between the parties. The act of addressing the audience through the presentation of the text as slide projection introduces objectification. I offer back to my conversant the stuff of our conversation, often unrecognisable and almost always imbued with invisible layers. Within the site of the academy, the challenge lay in describing the potential for new ways of writing by offering up a possible new form of visual practice: a 'hybrid'. The questioning of the norm was managed by seeking transgression through the authorship that arose from multiple voices engaging in an act that was simultaneously private and public. My role as editor ensured the continuation of the controlling of meaning and property, affirming the traditional right of the author. Within my collaborative practice the next step must surely be social authorship, where the text is produced collectively and the author is no longer anchored in one person. This approach, could by association, extend the role of what are currently structured discursive events, and the idea of the seminar, by including people from other disciplines as readers and contributors in a process of collective and collaborative authoring.

A mental and physical state

And yet each time I construct an environment from which to write through engagement, my physical and mental state has to be made to suffer. The visceral experience of exposing myself to people requires that I get to the edge of paralytic fear in order to write. Pain must be the foremost emotion, crucial to the creation of a longed-for state of pleasure that comes at the moment when meaningful conversation is attained. This conflicting condition of pain and pleasure has an infantilising effect, a controlling, disciplinary state dependent on nervousness and anxiety. Physical effects can include nausea, necessary in the ultimate pursuit of thinking through and developing a dialectical relationship with my work, establishing writing as a practice of extended thinking. Perhaps in contradiction, this often deeply subjective writing serves as a critical distance from my role as an artist, also being meta-art, the kind of writing an artist might, when writing in the first person, produce to describe their socio/political context.

By writing live in a public space that through my activity is simultaneously private, a tension is created that confuses definitions of public space. The opposition of the terms 'public' and 'private' contribute to destabilising the categories of conversation and writing. Private writings that verge on the diaristic or testimonial and that arise largely through conversation, are created in the visitor's space. I am literally producing myself through the public revelation of my subjectivity, in the public's domain.

Processes

The multiple processes of writing with which I engage include the gathering of existing texts by others and myself, and of excerpts of fresh conversations. Sampled fragments are cut, glued, written over, drawn upon, broken down, built up and rewritten. The changes established between these stages are kept, often forming the basis of a later text. The overriding sensation at the point of resolution of a piece of text is merely a fleeting personal revelation about what I am trying to do. At such moments I am close to what Joan Didion describes as her reason for writing, “I write entirely to find out what I’m thinking, what I’m looking at, what I see and what it means. What I want and what I fear.”⁷

The methods employed in the process of writing contribute to the text’s expansion. It grows as much through neglect as engagement, simmering silently exactly at those times that I consider myself to be disengaged. Vitally, at such times when the writing is building up, it is simultaneously falling apart, ready to be reconstructed in a new way, one element or other temporarily brought to the fore.

Fragmentation versus linearity

That there is no ontology of art or of art research is liberating. My closest reference is the canon of artist writers, only later contextualised against the philosophers, sociologists, and psychoanalysts. It is vital for me to exist in a sphere of artists’ writing that circulates in parallel with those masters from other disciplines, maintaining the healthy tension of sparring with the history of a position, asserting the right to be beyond classification.

My use of the fragment in building towards a larger whole contrasts directly with the linearity of essay-writing. In combining a related series of smaller components I aim for the requirement of re-reading as a way of negotiating temporality. The combination of the written fragment with the medium of the projected slide image requires the activation of one’s feelings and one’s body. This contrasts directly with the institution’s promotion of linear writing as a way of acquiring and developing literacy whilst managing to negate the very subjectivity involved in acquiring and developing it. Existing academic genres are thankfully still in flux, signalling the possibility for manoeuvre and the introduction of the very thing that may currently be viewed as challenging formats considered as successful, but in need of review. Rather than being constrained within our disciplines, should we not embrace the qualities of others by forming alliances with other disciplines as a way of addressing transformation, social agency, re-imagining the political, to look again at the potential of writing within the academy.

7. Didion, Joan, *Why I write*, New York Times Magazine, 1976.

Reading through the body

The way that I write, and the processes engaged to bring that writing into being, sets up a particular type of reading, established through conversation – the application of text to paper, translation of the written/drawn image to digital (in this case, slide) projection and the subsequent introduction of movement. Movement enters through the pacing of the slide projection, rhythm creating sound as the viewer reads silently to herself, confronting a larger than life-size projection, falling in with the tempo offered by the pace at which the slides change. In this bodily act of reading the changing texts, a new type of space is created that exists between monologue, dialogue, essay, poetics, reflection, research and documentation, within the space between subjective and objective knowledge. Different things are allowed to happen at the same time, building on the dichotomies created in the friction between talking, listening, then writing. The viewer who stands and watches, engulfed by the light of the projected image is both tuning in to the meaning of the text and attuning their bodily presence, adjusting through the tone and tempo offered by the work.